

Franchot Enters Race for Md. Comptroller

Saying Schaefer Is Tied to Ehrlich, Delegate Calls Him

'Republican Masquerading as a Democrat'

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Del. Peter Franchot (D-Montgomery) announced yesterday that he will challenge state Comptroller William Donald Schaefer next year in a campaign that will probably cast Schaefer (D) as out of step with the state's loyal and progressive Democrats.

Franchot said Schaefer has moved away from Democratic initiatives and aligned himself with Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. and his Republican agenda.

"Don't be fooled by a wolf in sheep's clothing," Franchot said during an announcement in the lobby of an office building in downtown Silver Spring. "Our Democratic comptroller is a Democrat in name only, a Republican masquerading as a Democrat."

Franchot said his race will be about defining "the heart and soul of the Democratic Party."

Schaefer, 84, a former governor who has served as comptroller since 1998, was unavailable for comment yesterday.

Michael Golden, a spokesman for Schaefer, said that Franchot sounded a lot like former secretary of state John T. Willis, whom Schaefer trounced in a reelection bid in 2002.

"The thing that makes me happy is that he has dusted off the failed strategy of John Willis," Golden said. "He has nothing new to offer, nothing new to say when it comes to opposing Comptroller Schaefer."

Willis mounted a last-minute campaign against Schaefer in 2002 in a race that was largely backed by former Democratic Gov. Parris Glendening, a Schaefer nemesis.

Franchot, 57, said he realizes that he is facing an uphill battle in his attempt to unseat Schaefer, a legend in Maryland politics who served two terms as governor and four terms as mayor of Baltimore. He has held elected office for more than five decades.

Yesterday, Franchot even called Schaefer the "Babe Ruth of Maryland politics."

"But even Babe Ruth retired," Franchot said.

"I know I'm the underdog, but I also know that this is winnable," he said after greeting the nearly 50 people who came to support his announcement.

Franchot said he is boosted by elec-

tions last week in Virginia, where voters chose a Democrat over a Republican in the gubernatorial race, proving that Democratic ideals are strong among the electorate, he said.

Franchot, who unsuccessfully ran for Congress in the late 1980s, has been a member of the House of Delegates for 20 years. Most recently he has served as chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee on transportation and the environment. His experience, Franchot said, has readied him for the comptroller post.

The comptroller is an obscure office, but it is also one of the most powerful positions in state government.

In the position, Schaefer serves, in essence, as the state tax collector and holds a seat, along with the governor and state treasurer, on the Board of Public Works, which oversees state spending.

"Comptroller is the swing vote," Franchot said, "and William Donald Schaefer has been swinging the wrong way."

Unlike Willis, who also used a strategy of questioning Schaefer's loyalty, Franchot said, time has proven Schaefer's allegiance to Republicans and Republican initiatives, especially during Ehrlich's tenure as governor.

And Democratic elected officials are showing their dismay, Franchot said. He has 25 elected officials signed on to endorse him, he said.

Golden said Schaefer does not blindly endorse candidates, just because they are fellow Democrats. He also objected to the characterization that Schaefer blindly supports some of Ehrlich's initiatives.

"He has opposed several things that the governor has pushed," Golden said, including closing the loophole that allowed Delaware companies to shelter taxes from Maryland. "This holier-than-thou attitude that [Franchot] is putting forward just doesn't hold water."

Yesterday's event drew dozens of elected officials, including Montgomery County Council member Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large) and House Majority Whip Anthony G. Brown (D-Prince George's).

Franchot urged voters to elect "a real Democrat, not a Bush-endorsing, Clinton-bashing, Ehrlich-supporting Republican like William Donald Schaefer."

Golden said Schaefer is popular for a reason. "Clearly the majority of voters think he is doing a great job," he said, "no matter what the label."